

# 'I'm not the person I used to be'

David Sedley

**D**o you remain the same person throughout your life, despite the changes every part of you undergoes? Greek playwrights and philosophers, it turns out, had plenty to say about this puzzle.

## Theseus' ship

Probably the most famous event in the entire history of philosophy is Socrates' execution in 399 B.C. on the orders of an Athenian jury. Less well known is a detail we learn at the opening of Plato's *Phaedo*: Socrates' actual execution, in that famous scene when he drank the cup of hemlock, happened a day late. A ship, said to have been the very one in which Theseus had returned to Athens from his legendary mission to Crete after killing the Minotaur, happened to be on its way back from its annual pilgrimage to the island of Delos. Athenian law specified that in the interests of purity there must be no killings till this voyage was completed. And the ship arrived back a day late.

You might think this detail to be of little philosophical significance, but you would be wrong. Somebody in the ancient Greek world – we don't know who or when – evidently puzzled away at the remarkable age of this ship. Theseus had supposedly lived a little before the Trojan War, which was itself usually dated around the twelfth century B.C. In that case, the ship must have been seven or eight hundred years old! How could it still be sailing? Only, of course, if it had undergone numerous repairs over the centuries. And not just that, but on further reflection it was obvious that *every* component in it must have been replaced at least once, more likely many times over.

And now we do have a philosophical problem on our hands. Was Plato right to refer to this ship, the one returning from Delos, as the ship in which Theseus sailed, given that not one plank, rivet, or beam of that original ship had survived? This question became the famous 'Ship of Theseus' puzzle, still today hotly debated in philosophical circles. It's as if I were to show you my favourite broom, and say that in the years I have had it it has had two new handles and three new heads! Of course, if I had replaced handle and head simultaneously, no one in their right mind would

call it the same broom. And likewise the ship: if you renewed all its timbers *simultaneously*, you would be building a replica of Theseus' ship, not preserving the actual ship at all. So why should their gradual renewal be any better as a way of preserving the original ship? Maybe you will ask, in reply, why it matters whether we say it was the same ship or not.

## Heraclitus' river

Maybe too it doesn't matter much whether or not we agree with the celebrated paradox of Heraclitus (early fifth century B.C.), 'You could not step in the same river twice'. A river is moving water, and the old water is constantly replaced by the new – like the replacement of the timbers in the ship, only massively speeded up. One independent-minded follower of Heraclitus, named Cratylus, went so far as to object that Heraclitus had understated the case: he should have said that you cannot step in the same river even once, given that the water will have been entirely replaced before you have even finished inserting your foot. On the other hand, for those who swim, sail, or fish in it, it remains reassuringly the same river from day to day and from year to year. For rivers, as for ancient ships, deciding whether to say that they do or that they do not retain their identity is likely to remain a matter of perspective, rather than of simple fact.

Nevertheless, sometimes it really does matter to know that something's identity has been retained over time. When you get your A-level results, it would be a serious problem, educationally and even legally, if it turned out that the person to whom they were awarded is not in fact the person who sat the exams. Yet aren't people, when you think about it, worryingly like ships and rivers? Day by day they eat, drink, breathe, sweat, excrete, and lose or gain weight. They too, then, are constantly changing their material composition. Given how many of these changes you

will have undergone between your exams and your results, how confident can you be that you will remain the same person, entitled to claim the credit?

## A comic scene

There was also what we might call a 'minimalist' version of this puzzle. Greek thinkers came to realize that you do not even have to wait until *all* your constituent matter has been replaced, as in the case of Theseus' ship. Each person is identifiable with a specific lump of matter – for example, I am the lump of matter (brain, bones, flesh, etc.) over here, and you are the one over there. Suppose then that since yesterday you have acquired or lost just one particle. Even with that minimal change, you are not the same lump of matter as yesterday, and hence, it seems, not the same person.

The first thinker to hit on this minimalist version was not a recognized philosopher, but a playwright, the fifth-century B.C. Sicilian comedy-writer Epicharmus. We have enough evidence to reconstruct the following scene from one of his plays.

Character A is approached by Character B for payment of his subscription to the running expenses of a forthcoming banquet. Strapped for cash, he resorts to asking B a riddle:

A: 'Say you took an odd number of pebbles, or if you like an even number, and chose to add or subtract a pebble: do you think it would still be the same number?'

B: 'No.'

A: 'Or again, say you took a measure of one cubit and chose to add, or cut off, some other length: that measure would no longer exist, would it?'

B: 'No.'

A: 'Well now, think of people in the same way. One is growing, another is diminishing, and all are constantly in the process of change. But what by its nature changes and never stays put must already be different from what it has changed from. You and I are different today

*from who we were yesterday, and by the same argument we will be different again and never the same in the future.'*

B concedes the point. A then points out that he himself cannot be the same person who contracted the debt yesterday, nor indeed the person who will be attending the banquet. In that case he can hardly be held liable for the debt. B, exasperated, lands a punch. And when A protests, it is B who neatly sidesteps the protest, pointing out that it was not he but somebody else who struck the blow.

Puzzles like this not only make good slapstick, but can also be the spur to philosophical advances. The Stoics, the dominant philosophical school in the third and second centuries B.C., wrestled repeatedly with Epicharmus' enigma, developing in the process some of their key philosophical distinctions. There must be some distinctive quality, they concluded, that is unique to you and persists throughout your life, amounting to *what it is like to be you* and no one else. Whatever this mysterious property is, they saw that, in view of the identity puzzle, it must be something radically distinct from the constantly changing *matter* you consist of. And that reflection in turn helped the Stoics develop their own complex theory of four different levels of being.

### **Life as a series of episodes**

But for the last word we should return to Plato, this time his *Symposium*. There we are told how all living things naturally strive for a degree of immortality. Whereas the gods have their immortality built in, as it were, the rest of us have to earn it by our efforts. The most familiar way of doing so is by reproduction: animals and plants seek to live on through their biological offspring. But there are other, intellectually superior ways of achieving this same approximation to immortality, for example by leaving behind as your enduring representatives other kinds of offspring, such as your poetry. Now it may seem disappointing that these continuations of our being will not in any strong sense be *us*. But even that, it turns out, does not amount to much of a difference from an ordinary human life. What we count as a single continuous life is itself really nothing more than a series of overlapping episodes: over time every part of your body is replaced, and even your mental life is a succession of desires, beliefs, learnings, forgettings, and re-learnings. What you think of as yourself is in the last analysis not one person but a long series of people.

Recall now the pessimistic worry that, if what we think of as a single person is in reality a whole succession of people, our

present selves might forfeit the credit for the achievements of our earlier selves. For Plato, by contrast, this fragmentation of the person is if anything a source of optimism. If you grant to him that each of us is less a solo runner through life than a sort of relay team, its first member an infant and its last a senior citizen, that thought does not stop you valuing your life just as much as if it were that of a single enduring individual. Hence, even if after your death your stake in the world will be represented by the offspring you leave behind, not by you in person, that will be barely different from, and just as valuable as, your present mode of existence, in which your present self will shortly be passing on the baton to the next member of the team.

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